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ABSTRACT

Parents, teachers, and other caregivers need to be aware of certain fundamental concepts to protect children from assault, abuse, and neglect. Among other things, children need: to understand what being a "stranger" means; to have sources of self-esteem (that thrive when children are loved unconditionally); to have good communication with various caretakers; to know that adults make mistakes; to know the importance of telling about abusive situations; to receive smiles, hugs and kisses, etc., from good people); and to know that they have the right to be safe. Parents should be educated to ask early childhood caregivers about the safety of indoor and outdoor program areas; about health and safety rules; and about parent involvement. Some of the perils that face child educators include: (1) the attitude that many preschool children come from homes that have already destined them to failure, despite research that shows what good schools can do to remedy this; (2) the attitude that the best reading intervention sources must be reserved for elementary remediation, even though that means calling up the reinforcements so late; (3) the notion that it is a wise policy to keep some children from entering second grade and to put them instead in some limbo program after first grade, despite evidence that such students are more likely to drop out; (4) the nostrum that smaller kindergarten and primary school classes need to be nationally pursued, despite decades of research into pupil group size reductions indicating temporary gains not worth the extra expense that schools had to take on; and (5) the attitude that whole language instruction can replace phonics driven preschool, kindergarten, and primary curriculums. (RS)

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"CHILD NURTURE AND EDUCATION
SEARCHING FOR PROMISES IN THE MIDST OF PERILS"

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CHILD NURTURE AND EDUCATION: SEARCHING FOR PROMISES IN THE MIDST OF PERILS

As panel chair and facilitator, a few thoughts about the title of this special session are appropriate. In reflecting on the current American scene and places for infants and children in it, I must refer to the famous opening of the novel, A Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens, "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times."

Children in Peril:

Some of the most important knowledge needed by American children reflects a "worst of times" deficit culture approach. That outlook is implied in newspaper headlines like: "Should A child be left alone?" or "Tips Help Protect Kids," or "Dress Smart and Stay Alive," and, not surprisingly, "Keeping Your Kids Safe from Crime." These were headlines in one special section of the Sunday, March 28, *Milwaukee Journal*. The perils of being a child in the worst of times? Who will deny it when parents, teachers, and professional care-givers search for wisdom that will help protect children from perils of assault, abuse and neglect.

This April is National Child Abuse Prevention month and ironically the abuse perils aren't usually *out there*. In 80% of child abuse cases, it isn't the stranger in a park, but the mother, father, stepparent, grandparent, relative, sitter, or good neighbor who is the source of physical, emotional, sexual, or neglect abuse. Parents Anonymous offers weekly support groups and

a 24 hour stress line where individuals can discuss their parenting concerns or just release some tension. The mission of that nonprofit organization is to help parents deal with their anger before it turns to abuse.

Who will deny that children are in peril? Who will deny the relevance of current recommendations. For example, there are some fundamental concepts that parents, teachers, and other care-givers need to be aware of in order to protect children from assault, abuse, and neglect. These child needs were compiled by Lana DeVinny, program director of SCAN - Stop Child Abuse and Neglect. They include:

- children needing to know their phone numbers (including area code), their full name and address (including state), and how to dial, pushbutton and pay telephones.
- parents not buying items such as shirts and hats, with a child's name on them. When a person calls a child by name that person no longer seems like a stranger.
- children needing to understand what being "a stranger" means. But don't forget what was just emphasized about the most frequent source of danger for children.
- children needing sources of self-esteem which thrives when they feel loved unconditionally.
- children needing a lot of good communication with various caretakers, most specifically with parents.
- children needing to learn how to express their feelings

and trust their feelings. If something doesn't seem right, trust that feeling.

- children having a chance to make choices and decisions.
- children needing to learn that adults aren't always right; that adults do make mistakes.
- children needing to know the difference between good secrets and bad secrets.
- children needing to know the importance of telling about abusive situations, and needing to know several people they can tell if they need help. They also need to know that if an adult does not get help for the child, they should tell another adult.
- children needing smiles, eye-contact, hugs, and kisses from good adults like ourselves.
- children needing to know they have the right to be safe.

Perils and Parent Consumers:

Let's not forget the needs and rights of parents. They are another imperiled human species if they aren't thoughtful consumers of infant, early childhood, kindergarten, and primary school education. What should we be educating parents to ask us about? Perhaps all of the following and even more:

- Are the indoor and outdoor program areas safe?
- Are the children supervised by sight at all times?
- Are the bathrooms nearby?
- Are there written health, safety, and emergencies rules? for all staff to know and follow?

- Is the staff qualified in preschool and/or school age child care?
- Are there enough adults for the number of children in the program?
- Does the staff talk to children often and in a friendly, helpful way?
- Does the staff encourage children to be independent?
- Are children of both sexes given equal opportunity to try the same activities?
- Does it appear that the staff does not use physical or other punishment that hurts, frightens or humiliates children?
- Are children encouraged to solve problems without being forced to?
- Are children relaxed and happy while they play?
- Are there fun and exciting activities to choose from each day?
- Are there enough equipment and materials to make the play areas interesting?
- Is there enough space for children to play in groups or individually?
- Is there an area set aside for quiet activities?
- Is there evidence that all parents receive reports on their children?
- Are there parent participation opportunities in the

program curriculum?

- Are there opportunities for other community adults to participate in the program, assuming careful screening prior to that participation?
- Can parents visit at any time?
- Are questions and comments from parents encouraged?

Reeducating Ourselves:

Being ready to care for and teach children wisely is never a finished state but we should always be moving toward it, never being content with where we are. We should fight any indifference that puts *our own effectiveness* as child educators in peril. Some of those perils include:

- The idea that IQ is a fixed attribute. A bad attitude! Good studies of birth-to-3 interventions indicate that IQ is not a fixed quality. "It can be modified by changing a child's environment at home and/or in special center-based programs. Birth-to-3 interventions can also influence special education referrals and retention." (Slavin, Karweit and Wasik, 1993)

- The attitude that many preschool children come from homes that have already destined them to fail. That is a dangerous and erroneous attitude because it deemphasizes the important work that good centers and schools can accomplish in spite of poor home and neighborhood forces. "Almost all children, regardless of social class or other factors, enter 1st grade full of enthusiasm, motivation, and self-confidence, fully expecting to succeed in school." (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik, 1993) By

the end of 1st grade, many of these same children have reduced their enthusiasms. They've discovered that their high expectations are not coming true, and they've begun to see school as punishing and demeaning. "Reform is needed at all levels of education, but no goal of reform is as important as seeing that all children start off their school careers with success." (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik, 1993)

Research on birth-to-3 preschool, and kindergarten programs shows that we know how to teach 1st grade children good language, cognitive skills, and self-concepts no matter what their family backgrounds or personal characteristics. Research on tutoring with focus on word-attack skills, i.e. phonics, and metacognitive skills shows that we know how to make almost all children, from every kind of home and neighborhood, reading capable by 4th grade. (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik, 1989)

- The attitude that we must invest the best of our reading intervention resources in good elementary remediation-a strange attitude because it recommends calling up the reinforcements so late. The reading literacy campaign resides in birth-to-3 programs that educate parents to provide infant stimulation and put infants and preschool children in contact with highly trained caregivers who clinically practice one-on-one vocal and physical interactions with these infants and preschool kids. Such preschool programs are consistently found to prevent dropout, delinquency, and EEN referrals at primary and elementary grade

levels. (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik, 1993).

- That full-day kindergarten programs are superior to half-day programs...or...that half-day programs are superior to full-day kindergarten programs. The peril is assuming we know one or the other to be true. The few good studies comparing full and half day programs on end-of-the-year measures of reading readiness, language and other objectives, favor full-day programs. But these studies fail to find maintenance of those gains at the end of 1st grade.

- That keeping students after 1st grade from entering 2nd grade is the current wisdom we should adopt. In fact evidence indicates that children spending another year in some kind of limbo remediation program, prior to second grade, are more likely than nonretained students to drop out of school. (Lloyd, 1978, Shepard and Smith, 1989, and Karweit and Wasik,in press).

- The nostrum that smaller K and primary school classes need to be nationally pursued. The peril in this belief is the assumption that reduction in numbers will be the silver bullet reform. Decades of research into pupil group size reductions from 25 down to as low as 15 have indicated temporary gains, but not worth the extra expenses that schools had to take on. Reasons for such outcomes might include the tendency of teachers with smaller groups to teach and nurture the same way that they do larger groups. Could it be that additional education is needed by teachers on how to maximize small group opportunities?

Another promising question might ask what a teacher of 25

children, assisted by a well educated instructional aide, can accomplish? With the aide trained and practicing one-on-one tutoring with needful children, the hoped-for results of reducing class size might occur without additional full-time teachers. "Of all the strategies reviewed...the most effective by far for preventing early reading failure are approaches incorporating one-to-one tutoring of at-risk 1st graders." (Wasik and Slavin, 1990)

One teacher with 20 to 25 children may have little time for one-to-one tutoring. But the sad fact is that one teacher with 15 to 18 children seems to suffer the same plight. Tutoring and other individualized allocations seem most possible in classrooms with a teacher and aide instead in two smaller classrooms, each staffed by a single teacher.

Allow mention of one final peril for educator vigilence. It is the belief among some, perhaps many, that "whole language" approaches should substantially replace phonics driven preschool, kindergarten, and primary curriculums. Good phonic instruction teaches word attack skills in the context of meaning, not in isolation from real reading. Conclusions reached by Adams(1990, p. 416) in a comprehensive federally mandated review are worth reflection.

> "In summary, deep and thorough knowledge of letters, spelling patterns, and words, and of the phonological translations of all three, are of inescapable impor-

tance to both skillful reading and its acquisition. By extension, instruction designed to develop childrens' sensitivity to spellings and their relations to pronunciations should be of paramount importance in the develoment of reading skills. This is, of course, precisely what is intended of good phonic instruction."

I don't mean to snipe at whole language instruction. In fact I suspect it may be a possible alternative for teaching reading to learning disabled children. But at the moment, very little evidence supports new whole language approaches to 1st grade reading. (Stahl and Miller, 1989). More research support for whole language approaches may also develop as they gain greater sophistication and use.

Brief Summation:

We live in perilous times. The perils we must protect our children from may be the most apparent and probably the most essential, because their lives, minds, and souls are so directly involved. But the concept of parents in peril needs reflection. Parents who don't know what to ask educators and don't know (or forget) what to observe in places where they leave their children are in peril. And even we teachers are in peril from what we don't know or know poorly; and that compounds this triarchic notion of peril because its concussions cascade from teachers to parents and back to the genes of civilization, our children.

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